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ABSTRACT

When an individual enters a foreign cultural environment, the familiar signs and symbols that allow normal functioning and social interaction are gone. In order to adjust successfully one must understand the socially created system of hierarchically structured contextual units within which individual units of action are interpreted. These can be interpreted at three interrelated levels: the structural level (friendships, marriage, family, work teams, and so forth), the situational level (greeting, working, eating, fighting and so forth), and the meaning level (compliments, criticisms, requests, attraction, and so forth). To successfully adjust to a different cultural environment, one must understand the role of relationships and communication networks of the structural level, the rules that govern action chains on the situational level, and the form and content of relational and identity messages of the meaning level. (HOD)

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A CONTEXT-BASED APPROACH TO INTERCULTURAL ADJUSTMENT

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> Sets are seldom perceived in isolation. . . they appear in context . . . the interpretation of their significance depends upon a knowledge of the patterns in which they are used.
>
> -- Edward T. Hall
> The Silent Language

Introduction

When an individual enters a foreign cultural environment, the familiar signs and symbols which allow normal functioning and social interaction are gone. Interpretation and action become major problems which require new learning. Effort and anxiety are prevelant aspects of the individual's daily life. Constant adjustment and readjustment are required in order to survive. Sometimes persons respond to these situations with strong feelings of helplessness and despair; for others the situation becomes an exciting adventure and a new learning experience. For most people, adjustment is a complex of responses, ranging from periods of resignation to periods of genuine elation. Being in a cultural environment which lies outside one's own experience offers the potential for a variety of responses.

Adjustment to novel cultural surroundings has been the subject of hundreds of manuscripts and research studies (see recent review by Church, 1982). Sojourner adjustment has been alternatively described as an "occupational disease" (Oberg, 1960), and as a "transitional experience" (Adler, 1975), the former implying that the individual confronted with a new culture is "sick" and needs help to get well and the latter implying that the sojourner is moving toward a state of high cultural and self awareness. Conceptual frameworks have been developed which view adjustment in terms of typologies of individuals (Sewell & Davidsen, 1956), social learning principles (David, 1972), and a process resembling a "U-Curve" (Lysgaard, 1955) or a "W-Curve" (Gullahorn and Gullahorn, 1963).

Many approaches to adjustment conceptualize the process as one in which the individual must overcome "obstacles" which impede the sojourner's "progress" toward successfully functioning in the host society. While this view of adjustment certainly has its points of validity, it has structured our thinking about adjustment, instilling in us a tendency to view adjustment in a linear fashion. We search for the "steps" or "stages" through which a sojourner must pass; we tend to judge the "success" of the sojourner in terms of how much knowledge that person has accumulated; we focus on the progress made by the sojourner in identifying with the cultural outlooks of the host society; we propose "skills" which will facilitate the sojourner's adjustment.

Many attempts by sojourners to adjust to a new culture are

comparable to trying to learn a new language by memorizing words and phrases but never understanding the language of which they are a part. Little movement is made toward a fuller understanding of the multiple meanings existing in the action of individuals in the new cultural environment. The task of the sojourner is more complex than simply accumulating more and more data about the host environment; rather he or she must come to understand the pattern within which new data can be interpreted. The sojourner must learn to decipher actions within a different contextual system. As Barnlund and Nomura (1985) point out, learning something about a new culture is "not simply the accumulation of data, interesting as they might be, but of insight into the cultural unconscious" (p. 357). The task of the sojourner is not so much to gradually identify with the norms and values of the host society as it is modify his or her interpretative scheme in response to novel cultural experiences, a process which Kang and Pearce (1983) label "transculturation."

The purpose of this paper is to propose a framework for viewing intercultural adjustment based on "contexting." The focus of the paper will be upon social interaction rather than upon the sojourner's physical adjustment needs. Many writers consider positive social interaction with host nationals as the most important aspect of adjustment (see, for example, Brein & David, 1971; Deutsch, 1970; Klineberg and Hull, 1979; Oberg, 1960; Selltiz, et al., 1963.), and for some writers it is the crucial or decisive factor in adjustment (Church, 1982). At the

same time, it is the most complex task faced by the sojourner, and there is no guarantee that positive social interaction will lead to successful adjustment. However, it is difficult to conceive of successful adjustment without a significant degree of positive social interaction with host nationals.

Context, Culture and Communication

The importance of understanding context is suggested by Hall (1976), who says that the context in which a message occurs carries a great deal of the meaning to be assigned to the message. Hall (1959) warns us about attempting to learn more and more "sets" without coming to understand the "pattern" of which these sets are a part. It is easy to focus on sets when one is becoming acquainted with another cultural system, because to the naive and uninformed observer, actions of individuals seem to stand alone; it is difficult to understand that they "derive their meaning from the context in which they occur" (Hall, 1959, p. 117).

While Hall points out that different societies depend on varying levels of context in order to accurately decode a message (i.e., "high-context" and "low-context" societies), he argues that any code is incomplete without context since it encompasses only part of the message. The level of context provides the foundation on which interpretation takes place, as it provides the "missing information" that is not contained in the code itself. As Mishler (1979) states: "We rely on context to

understand the behavior and speech of others and to ensure that our own behavior is understood, implicitly grounding our interpretations of motives and intentions in context" (p. 2). Hall suggests that contexting involves both internal processes which take place in the brain as a function of both past experience and the structure of the nervous system, and external processes which are a function of the setting in which an event occurs.

Failure to understand the context will lead to mistaken interpretations and destructive actions. Unless the sojourner can come to understand the pattern which underlies specific actions, it is very difficult for the sojourner to gain an understanding of the cultural system as such. For instance, the person might learn the appropriate greeting ritual but fail to understand how the form of the greeting relates to developing friendships, conducting business, maintaining neighborly relations, etc. Without this understanding, the person will not be able to differentiate the subtle nuances involved in greeting a friend as compared to greeting a business associate. This is a more difficult undertaking, and it cannot be gained without an understanding of the whole.

In many cases, aspects of the new culture are learned through the use of comparison and contrast. For example, when learning nonverbal behavior, comparisons are made between the manner in which members of the new cultural groups say "yes" and "no" or wave goodbye to one another, or less superficially, comparisons are made between the different notions of privacy or

approaches to reaching consensus. The sojourner becomes aware that differences exist and that these affect communication, but in many instances concepts are compared uncritically and inappropriately.

Many attempts to adjust to a new culture often conclude with a mere juxtaposition of differences with the resulting problem of equivalences. Westenhauser (1981) provides a good example of the pitfalls of inappropriate comparisons. He discusses the notion of "Theory Z" management concepts used by the Japanese and how these are often proposed for American corporations because they work so well for the Japanese. He reminds us that in order to understand the Japanese approach to management one would have to have an understanding of Japanese culture which would include a grasp of the following concepts: the corporation itself, loyalty, harmony, a "way of perfection," sense of obligation, emotional sympathy, formal consensus, informal "groundwork" needed to be done to reach consensus, symbolic communication, "dependency" (amae), private self and public self, nonverbal communication, and rules of relationships to list a few. He warns us that all of these concepts, while they have their Japanese names, "are difficult to understand in their translation because these concepts have often several variations, and because they fit into the Japanese cognitive mapping rather than ours" (p. 4).

Removing an aspect of communication behavior out of the social rule set in which it is enmeshed will lead the sojourner

to make an incorrect interpretation of its significance and its role in the everyday life of the people of that cultural group. Pike (1966), quotes Saphir to show that context is necessary for a correct interpretation. He asks the reader to try and make a report of the actions of a group of culturally different others engaged in some activity. Even though the reporter may be a skillful writer and able to give a picturesque account of what he/she sees and hears, the description would likely be unintelligible and unacceptable to the actors themselves. It will probably contain all manner of distortion, with emphasis given to the wrong actions, finding interesting what the actors find a casual behavior not worthy of comment and failing to observe the crucial turning points in the course of action which provide its real significance. The same point is illustrated by Edward Hall when he uses LaBarre's (1962) example of the "donut dunking GI" teaching an Arab "all there is to know about donut dunking." The point is made that the Arab needs to know much more than how it is done. One must understand a whole complex of American values related to social mobility, conformity, friendliness, male-female relations and much more.

By failing to provide the context for interpreting actions we are increasing the chances of misinterpretation, leading to a superficial understanding of cultures and perhaps to dysfunctional stereotypes. It is a bit like displaying cultural artifacts in a museum. Farb (1978) reminds us that such a display is always a lie, because the artifacts are stripped of their social reality and presented only as a physical object. He

uses the example of displaying an Eskimo kayak, arguing that its physical presence in a museum cannot be regarded as a substitute for the idea of "kayakness," because certain aspects of a kayak, including who owns it, who is allowed to ride in it, taboos concerning its use, etc., cannot be transported to a museum. Nevertheless, these aspects are just as much a part of the kayak as its wooden frame and skin cover, and only when such things are known can anyone begin to understand the meaning of a kayak to the Eskimo. Such an understanding is difficult to obtain from an approach which uses "set learning" to function in a new cultural environment.

Learning to decipher actions within the context of a new cultural pattern is a complex task for which sojourners have been offered little help. The remainder of this paper will propose a framework for conceptualizing context which will facilitate the task of the sojourner.

A Context-Based Framework for Approaching Intercultural Adjustment

Common to a number of communication theories is the view of "meaning" as hierarchically contexted. Hall (1959) for example, discusses the notions of "isolates," "sets," and "patterns" to show that any given message is related to a complex of meanings which exist on both "higher" and "lower" levels of abstraction. Pearce and Cronen's (1980) coordinated management of meaning theory (CMM) is based on the notion that any single act is subsumed within a context which provides an interpretive

framework for viewing that act. A complex network of relations exist among meanings within and among various hierarchical levels.

From the above perpective on meaning and context, adjustment is viewed as a a function of the sojourner's development of an interpretative framework for "contexting" message stimuli in the new environment. In order to adjust successfully the sojourner must develop an understanding of the socially created system of hierarchically structured contextual units within which individual units of action are interpreted.

While the number of levels which compose this hierarchy would depend upon one's particular focus of convenience, it is proposed that a context-based approach to intercultural adjustment can profitably view communication and culture as interacting on three interrelated "levels:" (a) the structural level, (b) the situational level, and (c) the meaning level. Within each of these levels, specific "tasks" of the sojourner can be identified. The remainder of this section will discuss these levels of communication (see Figure 1)

LEVEL 1
STRUCTURAL LEVEL (SOCIAL SYSTEMS)

Friendships, marriage, family, work teams, school systems, business organizations, government institutions, religious establishments, the marketplace

LEVEL 2
SITUATIONAL LEVEL (SITUATIONAL FRAMES)

Greeting, working, eating, bargaining, fighting, entertaining, socializing, celebrating (weddings, birthdays, funerals, etc.), courtship, problem-solving

LEVEL 3
MEANING LEVEL (RELATIONAL AND IDENTITY MESSAGES)

Compliments, criticisms, requests, attraction, trust, status, interest/disinterest, integrity, honor, insult, reverence, ingratiation, sincerity, respect, friendliness, self-confidence

FIGURE 1

A Context-Based Framework for Approaching Intercultural Adjustment in terms of a System of Hierarchically Structured Contextual Units
(Broome, 1985)

Structural Level

At the structural level, each society is characterized by various systems around which social life revolves. Basic social systems in most societies include families, business organizations, government institutions, religious establishments, the military, educational institutions, and community networks. Within these social systems exist various kinds of roles (such as executive, manager, and worker in the typical U.S. organization).

A sojourner has five primary tasks related to the structural level. He or she must come to understand (a) the importance attached to any given social system, (b) the role positions within the system, (3) the expectations associated with those roles, (4) the communication networks linking various roles to one another, and (5) the function of the particular social system within the overall society. For example, an individual seeking to function successfully within Greek society would need to understand the folowing: (a) that primary importance is given to the family as a social system, (b) that the family includes parents, siblings, grandparents, and several close relatives such as uncles and aunts; (c) that the father is considered the dominant figure in the system, that the sons are given preferential treatment over daughters, that children are expected to care for their parents during old age, etc.; (d) that a strong communication link exists between grandparent and grandchild and between mother and child, but that a somewhat weaker link exists between father and child (especially between father and daughter); (e) that the family serves an important and sometimes

determining function in business relationships as well as recreational activities.

Situational Level

At the situational level, activities occur which around which the everyday life of the individual revolves. The "action" of social systems and relationships occurs within "situational frames" (Hall, 1976). Situational frames consist of such activities as greeting, bargaining, entertaining, socializing, eating, fighting, and celebrating (weddings, birthdays, funerals, etc.). Each is characterized by what Hall calls "action chains", or sequences of events which have a beginning, climax, and ending, and a number of intermediate stages. Situational frames and their action chains are governed by what Pearce and Cronen (1980) and others have called "regulative rules", which set up expectations for behavior in these situations. As Pearce and Harris (1980) state, various cultural systems "impose dissimilar performance demands on the individuals who would participate in them. These demands may be expressed as 'rules' which govern the meanings of various activities, define the meaning of entities, and determine those acts which a person must, may and must not perform" (p. 2).

A sojourner has three primary tasks related to the situational level. He or she must come to understand (a) the rules which govern situational frames, (2) how situational frames relate to one another, and (3) how these situational frames function within the social system of which they are a part. For

example, an individual seeking to function successfully within Arab society must learn (a) that greetings are formal, relatively long (by U.S. standards), that religious blessings for the other are invoked, and that the well-being of the other's family must be acknowledged; (b) that proper greetings are an important aspect of other situational frames such as bargaining and many other business activities; and (c) that greetings serve to help maintain religious and family networks on the structural level.

Meaning Level

At the meaning level, participants in any social encounter exchange various relational and identity messages, as well as particular content. This means that in addition to the explicit meaning being communicated, there is always an implicit meaning which says something about how participants see each other and how they see themselves and how they view the relationship between themselves (see Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1967). Through language use, nonverbal behavior, and use of space, time, and silence participants give compliments, offer criticisms, make requests, show attraction, indicate trust, establish respect, confer status, show interest or disinterest, communicate friendliness, exhibit self-confidence, and any number of other relational and identity messages.

A sojourner has two primary tasks related to the meaning level. He or she must understand (1) the content rules which govern the interpretation of these messages, and (2) the regulative rules which govern the exchange of these messages.

For example, an individual adapting to Japanese society would need to learn that (a) interest in another's message is not communicated by a high degree of expressive behavior (facial movements, head nods, leaning forward, direct eye contact, accompanying vocal acknowledgments, etc.), but rather in a more subtle manner; and (b) that a person does not express open disagreement with another person, especially in the presence of other people.

Organization of Levels

These units are hierarchically organized such that any particular act must be contexted within all three levels in order to be given a meaningful interpretation. Thus, in order to interpret (within the United States) a particular person's action (say, a positive comment about the watch one is wearing) as a compliment (meaning level), one would need to know that the exchange involved a social greeting ritual (situational level) between friends in an informal social setting (structural level). Of course, in a different cultural context, the comment might have been interpreted as a request for the watch, because one's culture may have defined the context differently. In order to formulate an appropriate response, the respondent would need to know that in the dominant U.S. society an act interpreted as a compliment should receive a gratuitous reply that expresses appreciation of the other's thoughtfulness (i.e., "Thank you").

In summary, adjustment to a new society takes place on three interrelated levels. The sojourner must come to understand the role relationships and communication networks of the structural

level, the rules which govern action chains on the situational level, and the form and content of relational and identity messages of the meaning level.

The Sojourner as Outsider

Adjustment to a different cultural environment is almost never a complete process; that is, the sojourner is rarely able to function within the new society in the same manner as a person who has internalized the culture from birth. In this paper, the sojourner is considered to be adjusting "successfully" whenever that person is able to appropriately context incoming message stimuli and produce the appropriate response to the given context.

Complete assimilation into another culture is a much more "radical" process. Not only must the individual be able to interpret and act appropriately, but it is necessary for that person to actually incorporate the cultural value system on which the cultural context is based. Communication rules and communication behavior is rooted in values and value orientations (Kluckholn and Strodtbeck, 1961) related to world view, activity orientation, perception of human nature, perception of self, and social organization (see Stewart, 1971). Values lie "below the surface" of the cultural "iceberg" and reflect intricacies and deep structures that escape casual observation. While an accurate interpretation of actions on the observational plane is perhaps based on that lies "beneath the cultural waters" supporting these actions, incorporation of cultural values in a

lifelong task, requiring a deeper immersion in the new socity. Few sojourners will experience this degree of adjustment, and as such they will remain forever "outsiders," even though they are able to function appropriately within the new context.

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